

We have already identified several areas of potential cooperation, such as tearing down trade barriers in places such as Europe and the Pacific, building jobs with comprehensive progrowth tax simplification, and working to prevent cyber attacks. On each of these issues, the President has previously sent some positive signals. Now we need some constructive engagement.

We will be looking for signs of that in the speech he delivers tonight.

What I hope is that he presents some positive, bipartisan ideas of his own that can pass the Congress Americans just voted for. Give us new ideas to prevent Iran from becoming a country with nuclear weapons or to confront the threats posed by terrorism or to remove regulations that hurt struggling coal families. Challenge us with truly serious, realistic reforms that focus on growth and raising middle-class incomes—reforms that don't just spend more money we don't have. And if the President is ready for a new beginning beyond canceled health plans and partisan executive overreach, work with us to pursue an achievement that history will actually remember. Reach across the aisle to allow us to save and strengthen Medicare. Cooperate with both parties to save Social Security. The President should tell America his plan for responsible reforms that aim to balance the budget and not just more tired tax hikes.

Achieving important reforms such as these would represent a win for hard-working families. It would deliver the kind of commonsense progress Americans deserve.

So we welcome the President tonight. We look to his address with interest. If the President is ready to play offense, then we urge him to join the new Congress in playing offense on behalf of the American people.

RECOGNITION OF THE ACTING MINORITY LEADER

The PRESIDING OFFICER. The Senator from Illinois is recognized.

NEW IDEAS FOR AMERICA

Mr. DURBIN. Mr. President, tonight President Obama will deliver his State of the Union Address to outline his plan to make life better for middle-income families and those struggling in our strengthening economy. I have heard from both sides—Democrats and Republicans—the lament that even though many hard-working families are doing their best and businesses are more profitable because our workers are more productive, a lot of families don't see it in their paychecks. They struggle from paycheck to paycheck to pay for the basics in life. So we have to ask ourselves: What will we do about this? Will we do anything?

I worry that the comments just made by the majority leader suggest that he is relying on faith alone—faith in our free market system; faith in the belief

that if we have an expanding economy, which we do, and if we have profitability in corporations, which we do, that it will translate into a better standard of living for working families. Well, it may be an article of faith, but it is one that can be challenged because that is exactly what has been happening in America for years. The economy has been growing, and we have seen an increase in jobs for 58 straight months. At the same time, we have noted that working families across America don't see any change in their lives. They don't see any income change.

Then we look at the reality. The reality shows that the gap between the rich and poor in America just grows larger and larger. We can talk separately about the compensation for CEOs and corporations. It is reaching record levels—far beyond the excesses of previous moments in American economic history.

What we are finding is that people at the very top of the corporate ladder are taking out more money from the economy than the workers who are generating the profits they are gleaming. That is not right. The President is going to challenge us to get beyond faith in our free market system to good works by Congress. He is going to talk about specifics—ideas the average family can understand and appreciate, such as the earned income tax credit. Here is an effort to say if you are working, we will make sure that your tax burden gives you a break so that you have additional money for your family to pay for daycare for the kids, to make certain you can pay for the utility bills and the basics of life. I have joined with SHERROD BROWN of Ohio. We want to try to make the earned income tax credit available to more and more working Americans so we can supplement their income as they struggle to get by paycheck to paycheck. That is one of the first ideas we can pursue.

The second initiative the President will address is college affordability. There are plenty of critics of the President's plan, but I think he has put his finger on reality. We can no longer be satisfied by saying it is the responsibility of our society to provide education from kindergarten through the grade 12. That doesn't reflect the reality of work today. In just a few years, more than a third of the jobs across America will require a college degree. What are we doing to prepare the workforce in America for 21st century requirements when it comes to education? Now, we know what is happening. More and more students are getting deeper and deeper in debt, and many are dropping out because of it. Those who finish and earn a diploma are saddled with a debt which changes their lives. President Obama has said: Let us start moving forward to make 2 years of community college a commitment in America for those students who are in need, No. 1, and No. 2, are

willing to meet the standards. And the standards are graduation within 3 years.

I look at some of the comments made in criticism of this, and they overlook the second part of the President's proposal—that part which demands that those students perform in order to receive assistance from our government in paying for community college.

We have to look at a new model in America—in Arkansas, in Illinois, and across America—that is a K-14 model. That is reality. Certainly, we have to improve the K-12 performance. When two-thirds of community college students in many States, including my own, come to community colleges not performing at the 12th grade level, there is work to be done in the lower grades. But let's assume the obvious: If people want a good-paying job in the future, they need additional training. The affordable place to go is a community college, and we ought to make that a pathway that is affordable for every dedicated, hard-working student and their family.

That isn't all. The President also acknowledges and will acknowledge tonight the reality of the housing market. Since 2009, our housing market in America has been recovering from a recession. Home building has more than doubled, yielding a lot of jobs for construction workers. Home prices are going back up. Millions of families whose home value was less than what they owed on their mortgage are now turning the corner. But for many Americans, buying a home is still out of reach. The President plans to reduce the FHA mortgage insurance premiums which is going to help responsible Americans afford a home.

We need faith in our free market but good works by Congress when it comes to these essentials. The President is also going to propose a Healthy Families Act. Here is something that gets to the reality of life for working Americans. It would provide for businesses with 15 or more employees up to 7 paid sick days each year. You might say to yourself: What is a business going to do with people taking 7 days off in sick leave?

What we found is if the employer will stand behind the employees when it comes to the basics such as sick leave, they will get more loyalty and more performance from those employees. That is a fair trade. It is one the President will propose this evening.

I would say to the majority leader and those who share his position, faith in the free market is a good thing but not enough. We need to step in and make sure we have faith in working families, faith in the belief that if they can improve their lot in life, if their struggle paycheck to paycheck is somehow lessened, we are all going to be better off for it. I support the President's message this evening and look forward to hearing it delivered.